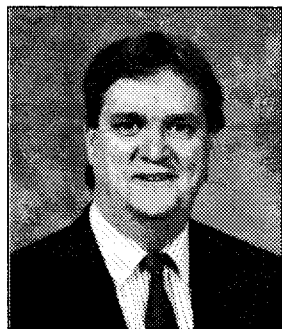


# Search-tool software greatly aids Web research

By Jim Carroll



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find that the most common complaint of both novices and veterans alike when it comes to the Internet is that it is hard to find information.

I regularly hear several variations of this problem from people. They do a search on line and find too much information, much of which turns out to be irrelevant. Or they do a search, using the one or two search systems they know, but cannot find enough information. Or they spend a lot of time flailing about the Internet, simply not knowing where to look!

Cheer up! The ability to search the Net for information is improving all the time, particularly with some software that I have begun to use on a regular basis.

Let's first put things into perspective. Four years ago, you could not find anything on line—the Net simply was not something a novice could turn to.

Coincident with the explosion of the World Wide Web, a solution seemed to arrive in the form of what are called search engines—Web sites like Open Text, Yahoo!, AltaVista, Lycos and WebCrawler. These were vast indices of information to be found throughout the growing, ever-expanding Internet. We flocked to these search engines like bees to honey, using them to look up people, companies, organizations, topics, news and issues or anything else that struck our fancy.

Excitement at the ability to suddenly access so much information soon turned to despair—as we found that a simple search for the phrase “hockey scores” in AltaVista turned up some 42,353 related pages of information. We simply could not deal with such massive numbers—and had to spend a lot of time learning how to search effectively while on line.

The challenge still exists today—but is becoming easier to deal with as the result of some new software coming to market that we might call search tools.

Lately, I have had the chance to try out a bunch of these new tools. Internet FastFind from Symantec (<http://www.symantec.com>) is

the first program I had a chance to use. A separate program that runs on your Windows 95 PC, it acts as an intermediary between you and a whole bunch of different search engines. Type the word or phrase that you are looking for, and FastFind will go off to check eight of the most popular search systems, including AltaVista and Magellan, for any related Web pages. It then gives you a custom Web page that details the results of the search, allowing you to quickly browse the results.

The greatest benefit is found in the fact that when it does this, it sorts the results into a simple, easy-to-use format that organizes the matching pages by site—allowing you to quickly browse the search results and review only those sites which seem to contain relevant information. It also helps you to narrow in on relevant stuff by listing not just the name of the Web site, but details from the first few lines of each relevant page in that site.

I found that it let me cover a lot of different search engines very quickly when doing a search—and I could then do a quick scan to find those most likely to contain what I needed. Within a short time, I came to rely on the program quite heavily, and have been using it for several months.

I became curious as to what other similar search programs could do, and so I obtained copies of WebCompass, EchoSearch and WebSeeker. I quickly ruled out Webcompass (<http://www.quarterdeck.com>) from Quarterdeck—I couldn't quite get it to work, so I sent off a message to the help desk. I never heard back from the company. If you cannot get support, I have always said, “Don't bother”. Strike WebCompass.

I then tried EchoSearch from Iconovex (<http://www.iconovex.com>)—like FastFind, it searches the seven most popular search engines, and builds a summary of what it found within each of them. But it went one step further—it actually retrieved the pages that it found—storing them on my own computer.

While it made the search take much longer,

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